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Advisory Council
on Senior Citizens

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Seniors Tell All



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1980-1981

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About The Ontario Advisory Council on Senior Citizens

The Council has been in existence since April 1974. Its primary purpose is to promote and develop opportunities for self-help for the aged, and to review current government policies that affect the aged in Ontario's population. The Council reports to the Ontario government through the Provincial Secretary for Social Development.

Membership in the Council comprises eighteen men and women drawn from various age groups, professions, and backgrounds in the five main regions of the province.

The goal of the Council is to help create a society in which it is possible to grow old with dignity and a sense of usefulness; where services are adequate and diversified, including an element of choice in all facets of living for senior citizens; and where people have genuine concern for the well-being of others. Underlying this goal is a firm belief in the principle of self-help.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Compiled by — Jackie Davies

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INTRODUCTION

As the title indicates, this booklet portrays seniors' views and attitudes towards life in general and primarily on the subject of aging.

The contents are based on original and unedited essays from seniors who responded to the Council's question in its quarterly newsletter "Especially for Seniors". The question invited the readers to describe their feelings about "How do you feel about getting older".

They did tell us and now we wish to tell you what older people think and feel about aging. One of the writers noted that older people alone can discuss old age - after all they are the only ones with the unique authority which comes from direct experience.

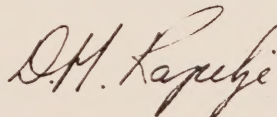
"Much has been written about retirement by students and researchers on the subject. Active people still in the prime of life, with no actual experience on the subject. All of them trying to tell someone else what to do and how to do it. Most of it is based on theory, ideas, and conjecture. So the time has come for retirees to tell all, based on personal knowledge and experience. Let's hope this gives a better insight."

This booklet does not attempt to draw conclusions on the attitudes or opinions of all the senior citizens of Ontario. It is rather a grouping of sentiments expressed by readers who responded to the Council's challenge of sharing their experiences. It is a first hand account of seniors' attitudes towards themselves and others.


We, on the Council, have learned a great deal from the writers - especially that they are diverse individuals with one common bond - age. We also found that the responses were honest and unique and would reveal to the younger generations the real feeling of aging.

The three sections of this booklet, The Image of the Elderly, The Environment and Social Roles, attempt to present different viewpoints on specific concerns and issues.

We sincerely hope that "Seniors Tell All" will be a positive step in helping younger generations gain a better understanding of older adults.



Douglas H. Rapelje
Chairman



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Introduction	
I The Image of the Elderly	1
A Myths and Stereotypes	1
Reactions	1
Disproving the Myths	3
Alternatives	6
B Positive Self Image	9
What does aging mean?	9
Circumstantial influences	10
Involvement in Life	13
Appearance	15
Relationships	16
Ambitions	16
Positive Thinking	16
II The Environment	18
A Living Conditions	18
Maintaining Independence	18
Accommodation	18
Community service	19
Family Living	19
Institutions	20
B Social Environment	22
Relationships	22
Youth Bias	23
Attitudes about younger people	24
Morality	26
III Social Roles	27
Discriminatory Forces	27
Retirement	27
What gives a person worth?	28
The Advantage of Experience	31
Roles in Family and Community	32
Taking Time	32
Patriotism	33
Speaking out	34
An ideal situation	34

A. MYTHS AND STEREOTYPES

The writers tell us that age is just another facet of character just as are race, sex, language, culture, tradition. Each senior is a complex and unique combination of many different features. Unfortunately, however, older people have often found that society tends to group and categorize its members, hence the stereotypes and myths about "the aged".

Reactions

Writers expressed frustration with this "pigeon-holing" which they regarded as unfair and restrictive. One lady devoted her essay entirely to recounting anecdotes illustrative of such attitudes.

- "I have found that the glow of the Golden Age can be tarnished rather quickly. I emerged, flushed and expectant, into the after sixty world. I was ready for all those things I always wanted to do and never had the time. I was unprepared for the push from camaraderie Career Days into the Senior Citizen class.

The deflation came not only from the attitude of younger, but middle-aged and older people as well.

A very youthful hairdresser, when I suggested that my rather thick hair might need a bit of thinning, exclaimed, 'Oh, no, don't do that. It will soon fall out.'

A thirty year old dentist warned that tea was staining my teeth. 'I'm afraid I drink large quantities of tea', I admitted. 'Would you attribute your longevity to this habit?' he asked.

Store clerks, I noted, were more frequently calling me 'dear' and telling me not to forget my parcel or my hand bag and to watch that step.

When I asked, at the theatre, for a Golden Age card, I was naively ready to show my proof of age but was told, 'That won't be necessary, thanks.' After seeing one of the better modern movies, I enthusiastically recommended it to a forty year old acquaintance. 'I suppose it's o.k. for your generation but I'll skip it', she retorted.

I was beginning to get a resigned aura by the time the freshfaced bank employee asked, unsolicited, if I would like to hear the advantages they offered for Seniors.

Later, I invested in a mink coat and had just regained a more confident self image, when a twenty year old sighed regretfully and said, 'I'd love to have a gorgeous coat like that, but I suppose I'll have to wait until I'm over sixty'. I was left to shrink in my mink.

There's no escape I decided from these hackneyed attitudes. A purchaser of a piece of my property didn't help. 'Naturally', he said patronizingly, 'you don't want too much to look after. Age comes to all of us'.

On the job, I drove in the daily rush hour traffic and the weekend highway stream for thirty years. Now if I plan to go over twenty-five miles or if a few snowflakes appear, I hear concerned remarks, 'Surely you're not going to drive. Why not take a bus or taxi?'

Not least among the discouragers were some of my contemporaries. I dubbed them the A.O.A.N. Club - At Our Age Now Club. Just when I had planned to master the Art of Living or felt inspired to live creatively, charged by the examples of Grandma Moses, Picasso and Bernard Shaw, I ran into a member of this group.

'What can we expect at our age now?' she lamented. One sparkling winter day that set me wondering if I could pick up cross country skiing, since I was formerly a weekend skier of sorts, I met another one. 'Well, don't you think, at our age now, we have to curtail our activities?'

Well, I could go home and happily try to develop a skill in gourmet cooking. Dig out that backlog of clipped recipes. Take one of those alluring cookery courses. My thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of the morning mail, bringing my monthly Cheer Up Cheque from the Government. A folder for the Elderly Citizen fell out. It proposed a simple diet for Those Later Years. Peanut Butter had top rating.

Should I just go muttering to my rocking chair and crochet granny squares or should I stir up the Life Force spurred on by such examples as John Wesley? At age eighty, he could thump the pulpit for three hours. He quoted in his later years this philosophy from the Greeks.

'Often I am being told
By the signs, you're growing old.
Whether I grow old or no,
By the signs I do not know,
But this I need not be told
'Tis time to live, if I grow old.'

All of us are individuals and have therefore be judged on individual merits.

- "We have as many likes and dislikes as any other group in our population. Some of us like to feel we are of no more use; others of us feel there is still a lot of steam in the old machine, though it might take longer to get it going sometimes.

Some want to associate only with other seniors, but I think they're in the minority. I like to associate with persons of all ages. But then too, I like things other seniors don't. And I don't like some things others think we should like. Some persons like champagne (or pretend they do because they think it's the proper thing to like) but I don't like champagne. I'll be polite and take a small amount at a wedding to toast the bride. But no more.

So my request to you all is, 'Please do not segregate us or put us into senior-style categories.'

We don't all like euchre, even though we did in our younger days.
We don't all like shuffle-board.

We like to be part of the whole community.

Help us to live our lives as we want to live them - not segregated,
not forced into activities we don't care for.

Please let us be ourselves, with all our faults and whatever good points
we developed over the years. We want to live with people of all ages.
We want to be part of community activities, part of the activities
of a community that understands and cares."

No one reacts favourably to prejudice and our writers were no exception.
One writer expressed her surprise at being referred to as "a harmless little
old lady", never having thought of herself in those terms before.

Some of the writers were angry at such reflections of attitudes, others
reacted with hurt and disbelief. Said one:

- "Questions and suggestions you get give you the idea that you are
prejudged and not rightly so...Nearly everyone put you in the same
category...Is the age of 65 the day you become a different person?
You join the group of human beings that are set apart. Alive but
not living. Are they trying to tell you 'game over', or life as you
know it today is over. No more tomorrow like today.

I find it hard to understand the sudden change in thoughts because
only yesterday I was one of you..."

Disproving The Myths

The myths and stereotypes of older people often result in portraying them
as inactive or incapable. The writers shattered these illusions by sharing
their daily lives and by discussing these misconceptions.

Suggestions that Canadian seniors take the old age pension for granted,
as it may sometimes appear to younger generations who have grown up
since it has been established, seem to be a fallacy.

- "Here in Canada, in 1978, Old Age Pensioners are spoilt. We owe
an indisputable debt to 1) those valiant old-timers who initiated the
O.A.P. scheme, in the first place, and 2) to the younger generations
of present day workers, who are paying high taxes for our continued
support. We would be ungrateful, indeed, if we forget those who helped
us in the past, and those who are helping us now."

- "Along with more or less intangible enjoyment our Golden Years have brought us the more tangible things such as Securities, about which we had never even dreamed during our earlier years. Our Vocational and Work Pensions. Old-Age Security and Canada Pensions, Medicare, and certain exemptions for Senior Citizens, have afforded us much peace of mind and contentment, so that we in our old age need not become burden to our children."

This is by no means to imply that all is financially "rosy" for senior citizens. As one writer put it:

- "It is fallacious to imagine that the world owes one a happy retirement, or that friends or relatives should be willing, at all times, to contribute to their happiness, although when such help is available the gratitude of the recipient is always manifest."

Writers indicated financial hardships, however they were not complaining. They appeared to be fairly well informed and expressed the views of active and concerned members of the community who possessed the added benefit of years of experience.

The following excerpts provide a sampling of the ways in which seniors are staying involved.

- "How can we be positive in our outlook? Keeping abreast of new ideas helps. There is always something new whether it is the energy crisis or the new United States-China agreement.

Solar heating is one subject I find fascinating. I even attended the the conference on renewable alternatives in London last August to glean the newest ideas. There were many more seniors present with the same thought. A solar greenhouse built on the south side of your home seemed to be the most practical for houses with plenty of space. You can save one half your fuel bill, but grow your favourite lettuce with a minimum of investment. A plan for a solar greenhouse has been my project this summer and it may be completed sometime.

Of course there are other energy saving ideas as insulation, smaller cars and airtight stoves. The latter have real potential especially as oil bills soar. Many magazines as Harrowsmith have articles comparing these heaters. They can certainly cut our oil consumption and can make use of a renewable resource, the woodlot.

There probaly has never been a time in history when such rapid social change has taken place. Many countries as the African ones are attempting to set up a new social order. We seniors sicken of the bloodshed, but social changes never come easily. We are certainly living in an excited time."

- "Activity of various kinds help to keep you abreast of things. When my curling friends say, 'Are you still curling?' I try a little harder to put the rock exactly on the button."

- "Upon retirement from an active career a few years ago, I became part of the Volunteer Worker Group and thoroughly enjoyed participating in School Programs, Community Third World projects, Nursing Home assistance, attending College Workshops on Continuing Education for Women, attending series of Organ Recitals, reading extensively, even learning to play billiards. For the first time in my life I indulged in a variety of interests."

Clearly these people are not living in the past; they realize the importance of keeping informed.

- "Trying to keep informed about what is happening in our own country and the rest of the world could be a full time undertaking, but we should try to keep well enough informed about vital interests to form rational opinions.

Violence in today's world is becoming more and more frightening, affecting all ages. There is much concern about the treatment of the offenders and the sometime light sentences imposed, so that these people are soon back out in society, often to perpetrate more violence. Seniors comprise a fairly large segment of society. We should, instead of complaining about things we think are very wrong, voice our opinions, to our M.P., in letters to the editor and in any way we can be heard. It may seem a small thing to do, but, better to speak up than do nothing. The more seniors realize that they are a power in the community the more effect they can have. We cannot change the world, but that should not deter us from trying to influence the tiny part that we do inhabit.

As long as we have the power to think and to reason, we should use that power to better ourselves - get rid of petty thoughts, prejudices and self-pity; crowd them out with more vital, life-giving and interesting thoughts. Strive for your goal."

And many do strive to be effectual. One lady, for instance, enclosed several clippings of her letters to the editor. Another gentleman wrote:

- "I have always detested the tide of lies perpetually beating at us to sell worthless, unnecessary products, to elect unworthy politicians. So I write freely and offer many subjects to the local press. Without intent my name has become controversial, a household word throughout much of the region."

Contrary to what some expect, the accumulation of experience over the years, combined with stimulating interaction with people of all ages tend to make one more, not less, open-minded:

- "To my way of thinking, we the elders are all kids at heart. Think about it. I'm sure we never lose it - just that we all are expected to be staid, and very, very dull to the young. So, we fall into that awful pit. If we allow ourselves. Not so this old bird (pushing 70). She is still flying high. In spite of heart attacks - debilitating disease (so they say). No way, Ho-say, finding in doing so, my horizons have broadened."

This type of attitude is apparent in the lifestyles described by quite a number of writers:

- "We have been members of a much younger team of bowlers for several years now and I must say we get along very well with these young people, who respect us as much as we respect them. I am also proud of the fact that our team is in first place in 'A' division and hope to remain there. With so much competition from these young folk, we find it even greater fun trying to keep up to them in our scores.
- "In accordance with my desire to be part of the community, about a year ago I joined a local Theatre group, having had such a hobby in earlier days (up to about 35 years ago) but letting it die in the rush of every day work. I wanted to be in a group of all ages where performance alone counted. I found that in this little theatre the young people don't patronize me, neither do the middle-aged nor those close to my age."
- "I love the freedom of pantsuits and hardly own a decent dress. An afro-style hairdo for my naturally curly hair has emancipatd me from beauty salons. For the fun of it, I give myself haircuts with my cuticle scissors. Fun is important in my new life."

This does not mean, of course, that all senior citizens have the same type of lifestyle but rather indicates that there should be no limits to the kind of life one leads, regardless of age. One of the writers reaffirmed this in saying,

- "I can well remember my grandma telling gramps to 'act his age'. They were in their seventies and considered very, very old. It is a much different story today, that straight-laced outlook has vanished out of the window, and about time too."

It is abundantly clear that seniors, although mostly no longer in the labour force, are still productively engaged in many other areas.

Alternatives

Stereotypes and generalizations can be harmful in many ways as they may discourage people from participating fully in all aspects of life.

- "I think I dimly resent being scrutinized as a peculiar kind of specimen, a somewhat sub-human type of human being. That this concept is rarely expressed and I imagine on the whole unconsciously held, makes it more damaging to healthy relationships and difficult to expose."

This, though, is not the way it has to be. The following is an account of how one senior opened the eyes of a young acquaintance:

- "Young Clyde had a few inhibitions, was blunt and open. He was 17, assistant technician at the recording of my earlier study on AGING. I was 70 at the time. His comment at the end was 'Till I heard you, just now, old people were like someone from Mars. But I guess you got your problems same as us.' In fact he was amazed that I, a 70 year old, was a HUMAN BEING; that aging can be as frustrating as adolescence; that we old can be as stubborn and restless as they. We can sing with equal fervor 'Don't fence me in' we have equal need to do our own thing."

Another writer, who when she was sixty-two began to develop a gerontology program at a community college, outlined how she was dealing with stereotypes.

- "My whole aim in teaching is to release people from what I call 'cage of age'. Once a person can realize that chronological age per se is just one facet of one's life, and not the entire criterion by which one should be measured the feeling of release and spiritual expansion is tremendous.

To bring this home to my students on the very first lesson I ask them to do a simple exercise. 'Imagine' I tell them 'that a group of beings from another planet have come to Earth to study its inhabitants. They are intelligent and peaceful but they lack one concept which is very much a concern to us - that of 'time' and 'age'. They therefore do not understand what we mean by an 'old person'. So I want you to write a short dictionary - type definition of an old person, not using time or age.

It is really funny to watch them. They start confidently, then look uncomfortable, glance covertly at me and their neighbours, suck their pens and stop writing. The point is that it is almost (or quite) impossible really to define an old person in such a way that the definition could not apply to any age, if one does not use time or chronological age. In other words, an 'old person' is just a person who has lived a certain number of years. He or she cannot be young in years, but can certainly be 'youthful' in attitude.

I have a private campaign to try to help change the image of 'old' as less desirable than 'young' by watching our language. For example, the term 'the elderly' always sound so negative to me. Not quite knowing why, I nevertheless ceased using it, substituting 'older person'. Now I do know why. 'The elderly' is a phrase which dumps everyone into one category, usually seen in lists of unfortunates such as 'the sick, the poor and the elderly'. In this context, the word 'elderly' is a noun - the main subject. Now, if I use 'older people', the noun is 'people' and 'older' is just one of many parts of a person - fatter, thinner, shorter, whatever. The difference in one's attitude toward age can really be a matter of language. As I say to my students - well, if there's really no definition that entirely fits an older person, maybe we'd better just cancel the classes and go home.' It really does drive home the point that just that they are suddenly all the same - and not a very desirable same.

Another great bonus of discovering this is that it seems to rub off on others and you will find that younger and middle-aged people will accept you at your face value - not at the artificial value imposed by society. If you do not stress your age, neither will they. Age is not something to be either ashamed of nor particularly proud of either. It just is - like your height or colour of eyes. You were born and you will die, and where you are on the continuum of life is all your age is. It is not what you have done with the years, what kind of a person you have become, or anything important. If you live long it is partly because of your genes, partly because you live in a society where you were never starved or bombed, partly because no drunken driver has picked you as a victim - there are many reasons nothing whatever to do with your own efforts.

One day I was interviewed on TV by a very pleasant young man who, knowing my age, wanted to be kind and flattering so told me I did not look it. 'But that's not so' I replied. 'Oh, but you certainly don't look 61' he asserted. 'Yes, I do' I replied, 'because I am 61 and that is the way I look. What you are saying is that I don't look like your personal image of 61. Can you tell me what '61 looks like?' Of course, he couldn't and maybe I was a bit hard on him. But we must all help in every little way we can to dispel these harmful images and release everyone from them. After all, if they are perpetuated, the younger ones coming along will have to endure them too.

Just be you, not 'you aged so-and-so'. Your body may change with age, but the older you become the more you will realize that inside there is the same 'you' there always was. Let that 'you' be free to be an 'older person' - never join the ranks of those mythical 'elderly'.

B. POSITIVE SELF IMAGE

Various elements are involved in the maintenance of a positive self image. One of the most important, and relevant to this particular discussion, is the way in which the phenomenon of aging is perceived by the society, young and old.

What does aging mean?

Old age and youth are not separate entities they are both part of one's life. This perspective is achieved by looking at aging as a lifelong process of growth and change. Many of our writers describe the transition as a gradual one, experienced by all but each in a different way and at a different rate. Sometimes it can pass almost unnoticed.

- "Yes, I am getting older. I have been since July, 1913. It happened very quietly for six or seven years; then, for several years more, age just came to bring awkwardness and embarrassment. In my teens the aging process was fulfilling and helpful on the social scene and I became somewhat poised, while the rough edges were smoothed out a bit and my shyness lessened.

Adulthood, wifehood, mother and grandmotherhood, all followed each other while I was too busy at home and in the community to be conscious of the maturation that came with them."

- "For me retirement is not a dead stop but a change in direction. I want to get up each morning knowing that I have something to do. I have simply stopped doing one thing and am now doing another. It is like moving from kindergarten to public school, from high school to University or a career. It marks the end of a stage in life, but it is a commencement too."

Writers tell us that whether or not a certain age is "old" just depends on how one looks at it.

- "It 's hard to say how the young and middle-aged assess me because people tend to skirt the truth about age. Young people probably think of 65 as ancient, just as I once thought of anyone past the age of 50 as being "over the hill". Because of activity in sports, young friends insist they don't think of me as old. Our grandson boasts that Grandma takes him golfing and fishing and is lots of fun. But, age is relative. My ninety-year-old friend keeps telling me to start a new career because she insists I am so very young, yet our son is somewhat dismayed that he has reached forty; he would like to be 30 again. Our twenty-nine year old son-in-law is appalled that old age is looming ahead at 30.

In our own minds we are eternally young; others grow old, but not us! Never! I am reminded of the reaction of a dear friend when asked if she would tell us about the olden days. 'Olden days?' she snapped, 'how could I tell you about olden days? Now, if you had asked my mother or grandmother, they could have told you.' The lady was 96 at the time.

- "On her fiftieth birthday, a favourite teacher made an unforgettable remark. She said, 'This birthday doesn't bother me as much as my fortieth, because forty is the old age of youth, but fifty is the youth of old age.' It was a positive way of facing the fact that she had reached the half century mark."

Circumstantial Influences

How old a person feels, and how well age is coped with, can depend to a great extent on our outlook on life. However, environment plays an important role. Certain situations, death and loneliness, for instance, are faced perhaps more often by older people than by other age groups. Special health considerations and limited incomes may also create new kinds of problems regarding housing, transportation etc. Though to some these can become insurmountable obstacles others manage to take them in their stride. Among the biggest common worries of the elderly are the limitations of financial resources. There are those who tried to avert this by early retirement planning and others who survived through very careful budgeting.

- "At my retirement my wife and I bought a little house not too distant from our church and close to a grocery store and the Post Office. In that way we escaped the high rent which takes so much of the income of seniors who live in a city. Our children helped us in the purchase of our home, so that we did not need to burden ourselves with a heavy and longstanding mortgage."
- "On a fixed income my first priority is to keep my own home, on which I lavish tender, loving care. This consists of painting, papering, washing and waxing, shovelling snow, cutting grass and digging in the garden, as well as sewing, cooking and carrying groceries. My income does not permit ownership of a car, smoking, drinking, going to hairdressers or paying for entertainment. For the past four years it did stretch to provide books as I went to University lectures to learn."

Many people do manage somehow, with family help or use of community services, to stay in their own homes. There are some however, who find the burden too much and are left in a difficult situation.

"The older people of Canada should be very thankful that they are living in a country that is concerned about the welfare and care of the aging. However, I think there is a segment of the aging that has been overlooked. Not the people who have sold their homes and are using the money on trips to Florida and other places in foreign countries, living in government housing with subsidized grants for all kinds of different crafts. They have it made. Buses take them to the stores every week, which is all very good. This is all good and none of these grants should be withdrawn. It makes the senior's life much better."

What about the younger old age pensioner, living in her own home? Usually it is a woman, left alone after taking care of her husband, ailing for quite a while. She doesn't want to leave the little house she has lived in for so long. She must keep a little money in the bank, because owning a home means the occasional unexpected expense. Plumbing for instance, eventually the house has to be painted inside and out. The lawn mower won't run, or the back fence needs fixing. She must have fire insurance, pay taxes and heating bills in the winter, she must have some kind of transportation, if she lives out of town.

The government looks upon these women as the fortunate ones. They look after themselves, and most of these women are the independent ones. They get no subsidies or grants from the government. A lot more women would stay in their own homes, if it were a little easier to do so. That old car she drives costs quite a bit to keep it running, and the gas takes a lot from her cheque, but she is independent, and that is what she is trying to hold on to.

This woman would be much better off to sell her home and move to a senior citizens' apartment, but she would rather be independent. Maybe the government could find a way to make it a little easier for her too. This woman is not the kind to complain to anyone, and is very thankful for the cheque she receives every month.

Living in her own home in her old neighbourhood enables her to keep in touch with the people around her of all ages, even children. This helps her to feel young, and from being cut off from younger people. The other people who live near her do not treat her any differently because she is getting older, and this is very important to anyone as they get older. Living in senior citizens' apartments where there are only older people, tend to make older people feel older than they really are.

The government should try to encourage seniors to stay in their own homes as long as they can, but the opposite is true. It is much easier to sell your home, or sign it over to one of your children and move into a senior citizens' apartment building.

Health is also a major concern. Most of the writers stressed the responsibility of the individual in the maintenance of his or her own health.

Writers told us about the many and varied activities seniors are involved in and it is clear that physical fitness does not stop at 65. However, several said that they felt their physical capacities declining and so they ought to learn to live within these limitations and at the same time "not bemoan the fact that I have to do without my former vitality". One writer pointed out:

- "It is very difficult to be kind and graceful while struggling with the painful effects of arthritis, or the awkwardness of movement of the after-effects of a stroke, however mild it may have been; these maladies do not absolve us from trying to be pleasant. I have endeavoured to point out some of the sad realities of aging; but make no mistake, they are not a necessary adjunct to growing old; in fact, it is indeed sad to hear that the degenerative diseases are more in evidence among the late middle-age groups (45's - 55's)

Some writers also mentioned the subject of death. Those seniors who have a strong faith or religion or just simply live without regrets, appear to see death as a natural, not too frightening and sometimes even welcome prospect:

- "There is a final aspect of growing older; one with which all must come to grips. Some are fortunate to have the belief that they will enjoy a better life after death. I do not share this belief and I have no fear of death, but perhaps I have enriched the lives of those I've touched, and I may live on in their memories. I have not achieved all I set out to do but I have reached many lesser goals and my major goal of making someone happy."
- "We are all thinkers, and especially when we get older, we are prone to worry what will become of us when our life here is ended. Put your mind at rest, if you have lived a God-fearing life and tried to obey the rules - God will look after you."
- "I am not afraid of old age. Much is done for us and there is still a contribution we can make. I am not afraid of dying. I am uneasy as to my reaction to long and painful illness and I deplore efforts, through sophisticated medical technology, to prolong a life which has lost its meaning. I pray that, when my time comes, I shall be allowed to depart with speed and dignity."

There is far less concern with death than living life to the fullest.

- "I have read with interest Professor Langfeld's account of a recent senior citizen's group dance, during which an elderly woman dropped dead of a heart attack in the midst of a vigorous polka. He says, 'Instead of widespread horror, most of the elderly dancers simply nodded to each other saying 'Wasn't that a nice way to go.' This anecdote sums up a lot of what it means to be old. 'Death is very common.' Langfeld says, 'It's just part of the performance. It's indicative again of how enduring older people really are.'

I know of one old lady, a Mrs. A.K., who, although she is in her eighties, graduated with a college degree just recently. It was she who suggested in a speech to a group of senior citizens to '.....get back in the fight and help the next generation. They can't count us out until we stop getting up.' I think it was a wonderful suggestion."

Death of friends, however, combined with feelings of loneliness and purposelessness, may lead to depression. This, it was explained, need not necessarily be overwhelming.

- "Depression is a common accompaniment of growing older, energy is depleted, retirement puts many people in a state of feeling useless, unwanted, the death of friends, the unhappy practical circumstances that old age often confronts, does make despondency a very real problem of growing old. Then, of course, no one has led the ideal life, there are many things we do not like about ourselves.

I think, however, there is another way we can try to grow old. I do not think we should let despondency or regret be our excuse for not trying to live to our full capacity, but we should tackle ourselves as the real problem and not let depression or any adverse mood be our master. We should take the time to think out and even to write down, what kind of an old person we want to be. Everyone, and the elderly should be no exception, should have goals to strive for. Certainly, we will slip back, wonder if it's worthwhile, but if we persevere and don't become easily discouraged, we shall find that we can change ourselves for the better. To retreat from life, to refuse to cope day by day, makes life at any stage just something to endure."

Involvement in Life

Most writers say that they are doing far more than simply "enduring life". Living is a full time occupation. Participating in worthwhile activities, contributing to community or to self-development appear to promote a strong sense of usefulness and purpose. Satisfaction gained through achievement is important in maintaining self respect.

- "Many pundits on retirement stress 'get a hobby - keep busy'. Well possibly this has some merit for some people, with little imagination or initiative and help them, but you will find that what you thought was a good hobby when you were active may not be so good when you are retired. Let's mention one -- model building. Most people get involved in that when they are active, for relaxation -- to steady their nerves from the 'rat race', and it helps and does just that. But when you are retired you are constantly relaxed, you are not exposed to the pressures of earning a living, and from this vantage point model building appears infantile and childish, unproductive and useless. Do you see my point? To really enjoy those 'Golden Years' you must have planned well previously, so that the time on your hands can be put to pleasant and productive uses. Now in my instance I always wanted to feel needed. This filled something in my make-up. So I continued to remain active in doing things for organizations, so that they came to me, and asked me to do this and that, etc. To feel wanted is one of the most pleasant things in life -- not to be cast aside, and if you haven't that feeling then I feel sorry for you, you are beat before you start. And to attain that plateau you must have worked at being wanted in your active years, so that people will know you and continue to need you, only more so because they know you have lots of time. I personally think that this is the basic success of a happy retirement -- to know that you are needed and not a cast-off."

Learning, either formal education, or otherwise, is a lifelong opportunity and can be pursued through a variety of different endeavours.

- "It is a time to plan and carry out our new found leisure so skillfully that the world will widen for us. Everything we learn seems to give greater appreciation of even the smallest things about us. Learning a new skill such as pottery or painting adds enjoyment not only from our own manipulation but through understanding and appreciation of others' work. If we don't use entirely every talent given us, we are short changing the Giver. It doesn't matter how many more years we have, now is the time to live to put forth an effort to do and to be all we can do and be.

Leisure spent in a new interest is not passive nor monotonous. One resolution for the retired should be to do something worthwhile, something new or something difficult every day. Routines can be confining, so should be broken often. Many prepare for retirement by reviving or developing an unused talent, for their own pleasure and for others. Grandma Moses wasn't the only artist to start late. Carving wood and molding clay are very rewarding occupations. Churchill said anyone can be an artist. We know the cavemen were. Such handicrafts are an education of the sensibilities, and they prevent some unadmirable conditions of old age. Dag Hammerskjold said, 'You have not done enough so long as there is something more that you can contribute.'

Reading can take us far from our armchair on transports of delight. There is always reading and study that have been neglected through the years. Since education is lifelong the elderly have a great opportunity to add to theirs.

Re-reading favourites often gives a new appreciation from an older person's viewpoint. I have made enjoyable and rewarding use of Open College and other radio and television programs. Refresher courses are as necessary for the retired as for business and professional people. Following one subject such as clouds, coat of arms, a family tree, and many more topics is a continuing satisfaction as I search the library for every book on the current topic of interest. Travel has been one of the most enriching experiences enjoyed in the freedom of leisure.

Cooking takes on new dimensions of interest, sometimes because of special diets, sometimes just to use recipes I've never tried before. This culinary art is not limited to women. Variety in meals has to be the spice of life.

Besides developing oneself there is even more satisfaction in helping others to learn and develop. Many seniors volunteer teaching and helping young and old in learning new accomplishments. Then the senior rejoices not only in his own activity but in the achievements of others. Sharing with others is a great influence for one's good health. The volunteer's conviction of his worth makes it a learning experience."

Educational opportunities now available to senior citizens often have a special meaning.

- "Education has been opened up to seniors and is one of the important benefits with degree and non-degree courses offered at low cost, and there is the opportunity to obtain that long desired degree. Such stimulation of the mind is a valuable asset to the well-being of the physical body. We must not forget that among the present seniors are many who would have liked an education to complete high school and attend universities in order to enter a profession that appealed, for which they felt a special urge. But there were not the family finances and university was out of reach as bursaries, grants and loans were not easily available then. It was necessary to get jobs and earn a living, so ambitions had to be tucked away at the back of the mind."

The church also fulfills special needs for some people:

- "I have been a member of St. Andrews's Presbyterian Church since I was 15 years old. We have a fantastic young minister, and after hearing his sermons you return home feeling on top of the world. Very often he plays his guitar and sings for us."

Mental, spiritual, and physical well-being complement each other and knowing that you are keeping yourself fit helps you feel good about yourself:

- "I am a firm believer that in order to stay healthy one must continue to do all that is possible to remain physically and mentally alert and active. That is why doctors urge upon their elderly the necessity of taking a brisk daily walk to stimulate heart muscles. There are other worthwhile activities which can be effective. Membership in a service club is a good example of this opportunity. Medical checks on a regular schedule are a must. At an advanced age there is always the possibility, though not to be dwelt upon, that illness or disability may overcome you, to a point at which physical activity is restricted. So to the many, accept the blessing of good health and enjoy it to the fullest."
- "Of course, I have my difficulties like everybody else. What if I have arthritis coming on? A swim at the 'Y' almost daily keeps me mobile. What if I have the usual B.P. of older folk? A daily pill keeps me normal. What if I live alone? A magnificent Golden Retriever keeps me company. And active. I assist in teaching aqua-fitness at the 'Y' to older folk, because the director thought a contemporary would understand their physical limitations. I have been teaching Bridge at the house one day a week...I mention all this and more, because the real secret of fitness, mental and physical, at my age is to fill your life with activity; and not wait for people to do things for you."

Appearance

Taking care of oneself is important to one's well-being and to one's appearance.

- "Before I retired I told my wife and children never to let me get sloppy in my old age. Perhaps that was one of the smartest things I ever did. I've being retired now for two years and hardly a month goes by that I'm not reminded by one of them to the effect, 'Dad please get a new pair of slacks, or please throw out the sweater and get a new one.'

At least once a week or even more frequently it is a good idea to dress up, put on a suit and tie and go down-town if it's only to the library, or to the art gallery, or to the nearest mall to look in the shops. Ever notice how you automatically admire a well-turned-out elderly person who obviously takes pride in his or her appearance."

However, there are also those who feel that as added self acceptance comes with the years, physical appearance becomes less important.

- "Many of the things we fussed about in the past, no longer seem important. What if we have a few wrinkles and our hair has turned white? I've had more compliments on my white hair than I ever had when it was brown."

Relationships

Many seniors found that self esteem comes not only from within but also from happy, successful relationships with other people.

- "How do the middle-aged treat us? Most we have known since their school-days; we have followed their romances, their marriages, their business ventures and birth and development of their children. Without exception they treat us with respect, with friendliness, with understanding. Come to think of it, that's the way we've always treated them. Perhaps, regardless of age, therein lies the secret of all interpersonal relationships."
- "Our grandchildren and their friends are now in their early twenties; they are the young with whom we have most contact. They treat us with confidence, with love, with high esteem. As children they called Laurie, 'Suzie'; they treated her more as a big sister who ranked somewhere between themselves and their parents. I believe they looked on me as an older friend who told intriguing stories and who grew magic apples with nickels inside them. Over the years the picture has changed. Their 'Hi Suzie! Hi Pop!' is just as warm and friendly but now they tell us of the problems of their modern lifestyle. The generation gap is bridged by a close bond of understanding. Perhaps this grandchild's message at Christmas expresses it best: 'Somehow at Christmas we all have a special need to reach out and say Hi! to those who mean so much and have brought us such happiness by being a part of our lives.' Wouldn't this make you feel fine?"

Ambitions

Heightened confidence, whether gained through activity, appearance or relationships of mutual respect, can be a spur to ambition. More than one senior expressed a desire to pursue a new career, as does this lady:

- "The motivation of going to University had two objectives, to fit myself for a writing career and to explode the myth of an age barrier to learning. At the age of 73, it pleased Carleton University, Ottawa to confer upon me a B.A. degree.

How I feel about getting older, personally, is that I am looking forward to it. It will give me more experience in writing. My way of enjoying the fun of doing is to write novels, and I hope you will enjoy the fun of doing, by reading them."

Positive Thinking

A constant message from almost all the writers was the advice that the secret of a happy retirement lies chiefly in the realization that ultimately every individual is responsible for his or her own happiness. Once positive thinking is put into practice things can only improve.

- "For over sixty years I spent my life being negative about everything, always ailing, miserable, and feeling unloved. But in the past few years I have become a disciple of positive thinking and my world has changed unbelievably. Now I work every day at seeing life, and living, as a positive business. It has become almost second nature for me.

I used to say 'I'll never make that bus on time. I'll miss it for sure.' And miss it I would. Today I know I will be on time, the bus will arrive soon, all will be well. This is just a simple example but I have proved it works with everything. Now I know my life can be what I want, just by the way I think.

My husband died eighteen years ago, so I had to learn to live alone, for the first time in my life. I made my life miserable with my expectations from others. If my children didn't write, or phone or come see me as often as I thought they should; if my friends weren't as attentive as I wanted them to be; if all the 'shoulds' and 'oughts' in my world didn't suit me, there was trouble. I'd stew over the smallest things for months; drove people from me with my constant complaining and chronic depression. My whole life was a testament to my unhappiness, my never getting what I wanted - all the love and attention my sick little soul craved.

But, when I learned how to stop expecting everyone to cater to me; when I stopped feeling sorry for myself because I felt neglected or left out; when I began to accept my family and friends for what they were - just nice people - my whole world changed for the better. I had to change ME to get what I wanted. I had to learn how to love and accept myself, and others, just as we are.

The bible says 'ask and thou shalt receive' but I learned that not asking, not expecting, brought me all I ever wanted. Relationships with my sons, daughters-in-law, and grandchildren are so good now, I can hardly believe it. Neither can they. Family and friends fill me with joy. I used to hate being touched, or touching. But, in my old age I have become a 'hugger'. It is delightful. I like and respect myself now and so do others.

What are the myths, attitudes, and realities of life? For me, learning to live more fully, because I wanted to, dispel my myths. I had to make my own odyssey, change my attitudes, to find my golden years. The reality is that it was a struggle to change myself so I could find the life and love I wanted. But I am worth that struggle. So are you."

A. LIVING CONDITIONS

Living environment formed a major part of many of the letters. It was dealt with both in the general sense, and as it affects each person in particular. Living arrangements, physical surroundings and views on society as a whole, were discussed. Writers expressed various likes and dislikes of different possible lifestyles as well as described their own situations.

Maintaining Independence

Independent living appears to be the ideal to most of the writers. The ways in which they have been able to do this were described. Some have the advantage of the support found in a happy marriage, others are fortunate to have friendly and co-operative neighbours or family close by.

- "Grandma, widowed at an early age, was entirely dependent on her children for support. I am not. I have known Laurie since 1921, we married in 1926. That's no record I'll admit but there's a special patina that glows on a happy marriage of many years; there's a sense of deep understanding and empathy; a sense of trust, of devotion, of lasting love. These joys my grandmother never knew and I doubt if many modern marriages will know them either."
- "I live alone but am never lonely. I am fortunate in having my family with four wonderful grandchildren right next door. I love friends and have many. I like baking, and my door is always open to visitors. I am never too busy to make them a cup of tea with a scone and black currant jelly."

Often it is the seniors themselves who provide the neighbourly assistance.

- "At the moment I live in a senior citizens apartment surrounded by other senior citizens of all types; rich and poor, happy and unhappy, healthy and sick, active and idle, greedy and generous, etc. I realize that I am indeed fortunate; healthy, active, satisfied that my meagre pensions take care of my meagre needs, reasonably generous in that I try to assist less fortunate neighbours, and pleased to be able to share my contentment with my dear wife and companion. My wife loves me and so do my children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. What more could any man desire?"

Accommodation

Seniors live in a variety of settings: in private homes or in institutions, in urban or rural environments. Some people remain in their own homes for many years, others have made the move to convenient apartment complexes, some of which cater exclusively to older people. It is felt, however, that housing needs of senior citizens are still not being fully met. Suggestions are offered regarding how this might be accomplished.

- "I would like to see more of the small, low, apartment buildings here as in England where they have attractive, private apartments in pleasant surroundings and at reasonable rents."

- "Fortunately, I had planned for the future by building a house in the country and by taking out a Registered Retirement Savings plan. Now, in my 66th year, my mortgage is paid off, and I have no financial problems. I really believe country life is better for seniors than city life, in spite of the problems of travel, snow shovelling, etc. Country people are so generous, as a rule, with both time and money, that comparatively helpless people are well looked after. Few of my neighbours have much money, but they know what it is to love one another and that includes the stranger who moves into their world.

Frankly, I would not return to city life for any reason I can think of; and I suggest that more really good homes for older people be built in the countryside."

Community Services

Community services organizations are frequently utilized by people in an effort to retain their independence. Much praise and encouragement for the expansion of these services are contained in the letters:

- "I am 85 years old, living alone in an apartment for Seniors. I enjoy snow storms through my window panes. I am not supposed to go into the bath tub when I am alone, so a V.O.N. comes every Tuesday to help me with my bath, takes my blood pressure, etc. I get five dinners per week from Meals on Wheels, King's Daughters. I also have a Homemaker coming once a week to do washing and cleaning and last but not least the Priest brings me Holy Communion every Wednesday. With all this wonderful help I am the happiest old soul in the world."

Preference for these services is due, at least in part, to financial advantages.

- "Sweden, known to have a large percentage of elderly, have conducted a study recently, the result being that home care assistance, which in Sweden, consists of help with cleaning or homemaker service, nursing care, hair and feet care, snow removal, municipal assistance with finances re taxes, etc. was provided at much lower cost than institutional care."

There is still room for improvement, however.

"Our government is very generous with pensions, rebates, etc. However, there are many seniors who do not need financial help, but would be glad of help in other ways. We need more home deliveries of goods, food, drugs, etc., for those who no longer drive, especially for ones living in the rural areas. We need more doctors, lawyers and accountants who would be willing to come to the homes of elderly people, and also more reliable help from service people.

About transportation - It is rather hard for older people to wait on cold street corners and hop on and off buses. We subsidize bus companies, could we not do the same for taxis and mini-buses to pick up older people at their homes?"

Family Living

Staying with family is a preferable or necessary alternative for many. This does not have to mean becoming a burden or interfering with the lives of the rest of the family. In fact, most of our writers, whether they lived with relatives or not, were quite adamant about continuing to lead independent lives. In addition, there are often special advantages in such situations.

- "I live with my son and his family of 4 boys and enjoy happy relations with them all; I also have a daughter living in Oakville and have fun with her children (teenagers) in spite of our age difference. Too often do we hear middle-aged fathers and mothers say they are too busy or too tired to take an interest in their children's games or hobbies. I still make toys and doo-dads for my grandchildren and love doing it, and they love me for it - 'grandpa' is the great fixer. How nice that sounds and you also get that little feeling of pride and self-confidence."
- "It is also a real joy and satisfaction when the children you raised and cared for are now so willing to care for you. It seems that one is continually discovering values that we had earlier disregarded or overlooked."

Institutions

Living alone or living with family are not options available to everyone; some have to turn to long-term care facilities. There are mixed feelings - good and bad. Some were especially anxious about lack of privacy, inactivity, being looked after by strangers, and isolation from the rest of the community. The following selections relate a few of the concerns.

- "I spent two years working at a Toronto Home for the Senile Aged, a wonderful facility, good nursing care and a great place to study geriatrics. What did I find out? At the time I was there the number of residents would average about 300, with the average age running around 85. My only criticism of the operation was not enough activities to keep the residents busy, so that they would become tired by the end of the day and could enjoy a good natural sleep. In order to get through the night they would be given a sleeping pill."
- "If senior citizens homes are built, then the multilevel buildings are not a good idea for the elderly. Most elderly do not relish riding elevators, and having to pass through these long tunnel-like dark halls is very unpleasant indeed."

The local senior citizens complex is a model and a lovely place to live for those who have given up their own homes. It has only two floor levels, divided by light cheerful halls. It is only half a block from doctors, drugstore, post office, stores and churches. High school is near by for those wishing to attend night classes."

One lady, worried about the medication which she was receiving:

- "I am eighty-one, live in a 'home' and am happy. My closest relatives are cousins. I have adapted my way of life and my philosophy of life accordingly."

This has been my home for more than a year now, after a heart attack, a fall in which I broke a hip and eight weeks in hospital. Since coming here, my greatest source of anxiety has been the large amount of medication I am obliged to take. After reading articles in newspapers and journals about the unwise, even dangerous, overuse of drugs by the elderly, I three times asked doctors if they could not reduce the amount of medication they were prescribing for me and in each case I met with a firm 'no', without explanations. Then I tried to find out the name, nature and effects of every pill I was taking. This was difficult and it was only after a year that I finally had complete descriptions.

The effects of the drug did not tally with what I had been told about my condition. Then, one lucky day, I was able to see my medical chart and to study it (an unauthorized study, of course). For the first time I had a clear picture of my own physical condition and understood why I was taking so many drugs and why I must continue taking them as long as I lived. Now my questioning and worrying are over. I also have a firm conviction that every person should have the right to see his or her medical chart. It is so important to understand one's physical condition and what is being done to alleviate, if possible to cure it. We read a great deal about secrecy these days, the secrecy of governments in keeping documents from the public is decried, while the secrecy of OHIP medical records and SIN numbers is considered highly desirable. There has been, to my knowledge, no discussion of the justification for prohibiting a patient from seeing his or her medical chart or other medical record. After all, my body is above all my concern, usually my chief concern. Again, doctors' evasive answers to patients' questions usually have the worst interpretation put upon them. All this secrecy is, surely, completely and fundamentally wrong, causes the patient serious and often unnecessary anxiety and lessens his co-operation.

I am thankful for the physical comfort which I have in this home, for the excellent care which I receive and for the companionship of the other residents. Contrary to much that has been written, it is good for old people to be living together; there is so much that they can share, such great understanding of each other's problems and often a depth of compassion which it is difficult for a young person to feel. Younger people whom I meet outside seem inclined to adopt me as 'aunt'; they are kind and courteous and, I hope truthfully, express an interest in my reminiscences, which they find amusing.

I have so much to be thankful for. I thank the good Lord for all his mercies to me and I am thankful to the Church for its support of my faith."

B. SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Relationships

The importance of human relationships was stressed by writers.

- "Our need for friends and love is as demanding as ever, and unless we cultivate new friendships we may become lonely, because of the natural changes that time makes. Life is short at its longest, so there is no time to waste in withdrawal from others. A friend is a lifeline. Our life goals should be enhanced in good quality as we develop in mind and spirit. That quality depends a great deal on our contacts with people, people to talk with and exchange views, people to sympathize with, to rejoice with and just pass the time with in games and laughter. Being quietly alone is also necessary, but we must appreciate that interdependence enriches our lives."

Contacts are made in a variety of situations and take many forms. Family usually rates high as a source of special relationships.

- "As we grow older, each joyous get-together becomes more significant for us as well as our loved ones. The commonplace activities of daily life, the disappointments, the successes, the happy days, the days of sorrow, have slipped by all too quickly. Now we are separated geographically, but the bonds of love and fellowship that tie us together as a family grow stronger year by year."

Companionship needs are also met outside of the family, as the following excerpt shows:

- "Coax your hubby to go along on a gad-a-bouts. It is reassuring to see two people, who have lived and loved through forty odd years, enjoy the happy years together. Unfortunately I must go it alone -but I have a pal, another loner, and for two old ladies we do enjoy ourselves. You try it."

Acquaintances and friendships are often found in many different situations: special programs, sports activities, volunteer work, participation in interest and service clubs, educational programs, churches to mention but a few.

Youth Bias

While various programs and benefits for seniors were highly praised, a feeling that society is still basically youth-oriented was pointed out. Certain types of consumer goods and the media are often held responsible for this attitude:

- "There is something about getting older that does bother me a bit and that is the fact we don't have much choice when it comes to clothes. The manufacturers sure cater to the young. We have to buy something that makes us look perfectly ridiculous or go without. The producers go in for large quantities of everything. That is fine for large families but I wish they would consider us too. It is better to pay a little more for a small quantity and use it up than to waste."
- "The T.V. is one medium that really plays it up. They cater to the young, adolescents and young marrieds. These comprise the "throw away" society and keeps them counting their shekels.

The beauty ads are another laugh. "How old do you think I am? I colour my hair. Do this or that and you will look 10 years younger. Who needs it?"
- "A television program in December 1978 which showed depiction of old people, dressed and moving like imbeciles was unforgivable, I wish them off the air permanently. Our image is sullied by media rubbish. It gives me a pain in the neck that isn't all arthritis."

This unfortunate state of affairs is blamed for causing some important values being overlooked, for instance the depth of beauty that comes with age.

"A dear friend of mine for the past fifty years visited me recently when we talked a while on becoming older. 'I can't bear now to look in the mirror', said she with a hesitant little laugh.

This, I thought, was a great pity...that she didn't want to see her reflection. I saw her as a pretty woman still despite changes the years had brought. In fact, I thought she was just as pretty as when a girl, in a different way. Her smile was as pleasant as ever, her face showed her fine character that had matured through the years.

For myself, I knew I certainly would have changed, perhaps a lot but it does not trouble me. This is to be expected and happens to everyone.

In past years I have studied the faces of older men and women and found them fascinating. I had thought of the joys and sorrows they would have experienced. One woman in particular would have delighted the soul of any talented artist for there was both dignity and repose in her face. It was beautiful to see. Surely these two qualities are to be envied and emulated. For age can be beautiful. Only go to a good art gallery."

Attitudes About Younger People

Despite the society's emphasis on youth, perceived by the writers, the seniors still tend to see young people in a good light. The feeling is that on the whole the youth today are not all that different from that of years gone by. Generalizations based on a few bad examples are not made too hastily.

- "What about attitudes toward young people? Some are just no good. Many waste time. Many are vandals. Many smoke up. But by and large I like to think the majority are real fine kids. My big complaint 'about the kids today' is their seemingly complete disregard involving the disposal of trash. Too many just litter thoughtlessly. But maybe just maybe, we did too."
- "You asked how we feel about younger people. Well, young or old you will always have rotten apples in the barrel, but nearly all the people I know are beautiful, they have their faults, but who hasn't, but my wife and I talk about them over a glass of mother's ruin and have a good laugh."

And others admire the potential they believe to reside with youth.

- "Please, older folks, be respectful to the younger folks. Listen to their ideas as they are ripe for exploits and mighty enterprises; their characters and ours melt together to make 'The Good Life.'"

The interest shown by younger people in reminiscences of the past, is gratifying. This fascination with the past doesn't seem to be anything new. One of our writers explained how he enjoyed the company of older people when he was young.

- "As a young boy, and on into my 'teens', I was very fond of, and would seek out the company of older folk. I was always fascinated as they would relate to me their countless experiences of earlier years and along the way. It seemed to me that to be able to recall such experiences with the excitement and certain pride, was surely the height of satisfaction and pleasure in at last having reached that 'Golden Age'. Forty, Sixty, Eighty years and more of varied happenings was thrilling and almost incredible to me.

Now here I am approaching that magic time of life myself, when I too can recall with interest and pride our living, and events of 40, 50, 60 years ago. So it all still continues to fascinate me.

Communication between people of different ages can be a very special experience. Unfortunately though, the generation gap is felt by some to be permanent.

- "More and more as I grow older, I become aware of the many differences between youth and old age. I like to watch youth from the sidelines, and think of the great chasm that exists between us: youth standing on one side with its valiant dissatisfactions, hot enthusiasms and confident hopes, eagerly impatient, with morning in its eyes, and age standing on the other, with its wisdom, caution and memories. Please Lord, give me sympathy and understanding enough not to throw cold water on the enthusiasms and nag and scold and sour. I can well remember the stubbornness and stupidity of the older folk of my youth. I did not realize then how soon younger people would be looking at me in the same way."

On the other hand there are those who feel that not only can the gap be bridged, it ought to be bridged.

- "Now, with regard to younger people than myself, I find it is always a question of communication, if one will not accept that idea then they have had it. One must think positively, keep in touch with current events, get rid of the Generation Gap and to a major extent 'Be with it.' "

Another writer described what she saw as a complex and changing relationship between younger and older people:

- "The middle-group have a difficult role, with their responsibility towards the current young generation and their genuine concern with the well-being of the older generation. At times, they reverse the parent/child role as they see our faltering confidence in our ability to cope. Contact between the elder and mid-group becomes difficult as each is conscious of whether to offer or withhold assistance or advice. Their ability and outlook make one nostalgic for the 'not so long ago' when one was also able to cope and had the satisfaction and responsibility of a new generation.

The younger generation constantly amaze me with their courteous attitude toward seniors. I have found them sincerely concerned in many ways, i.e. being helpful with shopping difficulties, willing to listen patiently to reminiscing of years past which fascinates them by comparison with today, and offering many helpful suggestions on how to cope with our life at this stage. They are refreshing with their third-generation outlook, an extra bonus life gives to measure it by. Their enthusiasm brightens many a dull hour with their very natural companionship."

One gentleman summed up his opinions on the value of different kinds of relationships:

- "We want to live with people of all ages. We want to be part of community activities, part of the activities of a community that understands and cares. We need the interplay of effervescent young minds with their curiosity and dreams, the sureness of middle-aged persons, and the restful presence of those of our own age."

Morality

Attitudes about current morality and value systems vary. Most appear to be tolerant of a moral code which for many, is not entirely in keeping with their own values.

- "The young people of my own children's vintage, in their twenties and thirties, treat me with a certain 'studied' kindness, as if not quite sure of my reactions to modern ways of downright irreverent speech or too blatant new life-styles. I sometimes wonder if they are at ease with their brashness, or do I detect the merest touch of envy at our seemingly unruffled past, with its safe conventions."

There is a genuine empathy and concern for the problems of the younger generation. Some feel they should give advice and guidance where needed but at the same time don't want to interfere unduly.

- "I would rather be the older person helping out than the young folks striving to rear a family in this day and age.

And now a word about how the young and middle-aged people assess we older folk. Let me say we must win respect, not try to demand it. If we expect courtesy and kindness then we must be willing to give some back. I will admit that the actions of some of our younger set leaves much to be desired, but I feel they are not entirely to blame. Some of the older people who should be guiding them are so busy making sure they have what they call a good time, they neglect the basic training of their children. There has been the odd time when I thought the younger ones could have been more courteous but generally speaking I think if we meet them half way they will respond."

Things really haven't changed all that much according to writers who cite such examples as the 'flappers' of the twenties and the disapproving attitudes of older people at that time. Many feel, however, that there is still a need for greater emphasis on the more fundamental values. It is difficult to determine whether such an attitude is a product of a particular era or of increased maturity.

Discriminatory Forces

Unfair as it may seem, it is often found that the prescribed role of an individual in society tends to be strongly influenced by his or her age. This even occurs despite the fact that age alone is usually not a good indication of skill or talent. Often not only are people assigned different roles but after a certain age many find that they are thought not to play much of any role at all.

Retirement

Sixty-five, the age of mandatory retirement for most of us, appears to be the turning point. To many, the imposed changes that follow seem very arbitrary.

- Do they throw good wine away when it get older, what about the ancient art treasures, the paintings and monuments, are they cast out, no, the older they get, the more valuable, that is why I say that age in years is a fallacy and age should be judged on physical and mental capacity thus allowing persons who have attained the ripe old age of sixty-five to maintain a valuable, useful and productive life for the benefit of the Country."

We hear of people who would like to retire in their fifties or even younger, to be able to pursue new avenues of activity. On the other hand, there are many who at 65 feel that they are still at the peak of involvement in their careers and would appreciate the chance to continue.

The many instances of accomplishment by older citizens in the arts, politics, private enterprise and so on, are often quoted as a reminder that achievement continues past the age of sixty-five.

- "Retirement is only a word utterly impracticable if recognized but amply rewarded if ignored. Many people have left great works behind them living and working each day with no thought of age.

Verdi was 74 when his masterpiece, the opera 'Otello' was produced and, at 83, he wrote one of the most ethereally and emotionally beautiful musical compositions ever written, 'Ave Maria'.

Fourteen years beyond sixty-five, Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote 'Over the Tea Cups', one of a series of humorous and satirical essays titled, 'The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table.' The world famous Italian artist, Titian, painted 'The Battle of Lepante' when 98 years old, and the German philosopher, Kant, was 74 when he wrote his renowned 'Anthropology.'

Lord Alfred Tennyson, poet laureate of England in 1850, wrote the religious poem 'Crossing the Bar', when he was 83. After the death of German-born Faust, magician and astrologer, many stories portrayed him a scoundrel and his life became a legend among Germans. But Goethe, at the age of 80, wrote a striking antitheses in the first part of his version of the legendary Faust.

In this generation, under the word progress, amazingly weird things have been done; some alarmingly portentous. Legally imposed retirement is one and the word 'retirement' has become significantly great as well as destructive.

Heedlessly hurled into a strange new world is a crew, obviously inexpedient. Temperament, individuality, and humaneness are not considered; just useless humanity as a whole pulled from the line of workers."

Writers cited cases of people who have embarked upon a new career later in life (interestingly enough, quite often as writers). Some seniors were continuing at least on part-time basis, a career begun many year earlier.

- "I am a minister of the Gospel. I retired from the parish ministry when I reached 70 years of age, realizing that I could not well take care of all the responsibilities of parish ministry. I am still active in ministry. I teach an adult Bible class."
- "I used to dread the day I would become 65 years of age, because I knew I'd be classed as an old 'has been' and thrown out of the job I had held for twenty years or more.

Much to my amazement and joy, I was offered my same job back, but only on a part-time basis, this, just one week before I was to retire. It did not take me long to accept the proposition because I was quite proud of myself to know that, even as a part-time worker, I was still needed and I was happy to have the chance to prove that I could still be useful."

What gives a person worth

Many of the problems that arise from retirement are associated with social and personal attitudes about what constitutes individual worth. After leaving a long time career, feelings of worthlessness are quite common.

- Retirement can be devastating - particularly for men who feel useless and unwanted. I feel that mandatory retirement at 65 is harmful and there should be flexibility in this area for we all need the feeling that we do matter somewhere and have a part to play in daily living."

Society does need all its members in many more ways than active participation in the "labour force". Responsibilities are universal and extend far beyond those of the "working world."

- "I hear so many of my friends lauding the shifting of responsibility when they move into high rise apartments. Small wonder that they soon get bored, although not many will admit it. Responsibility is what life is all about. Challenges that were met all our life were what gave us greatest satisfaction. It may be a job well done, or just a special dessert well-received by a guest. When they get older they do not want to take on an office in an organization. Let someone younger do it. Why? I've just been asked to take on the job of Educational Secretary in one of the I.O.D.E. Chapters. True, I have been Regent and Treasurer in various years; but it was nice to be wanted; so I accepted."

Fulfillment of responsibility gives a sense of worth both to one's self and to others, and need not depend on whether one is getting paid for one's effort.

Our writers described many different kinds of responsibility. They emphasized the importance of enriching their own lives and those of others; the two often seem to go hand in hand:

- "But, the experiences of rather a hard life have served only to polish and brighten. It has brought with age a certain philosophy of living and working with people which, I think, has kept me young in mind and heart.

I am not old. I am 69 - but not in the foolish faith that my body has not changed. Only that I try to keep my mind and interest at that level. The lack of education in early life certainly has convinced me that there is absolutely no end to learning. In learning there is youth and interest. Interest in maintaining the youthful mind that is mature yet finds so much in life to enjoy.

But advancing years have taught me to share. It was only as a new grandfather that I gave up being a Big Brother to one young boy after another. All of a sudden I realized that I was a grandfather figure and not a Big Brother figure that could carry on with such a youthful approach. Only in the physical capacity was I too old. So, now, I maintain a contact with young men who were Little Brothers, and are now fathers themselves. So now I am grandpa to a batch of little ones; it is a good feeling.

Retired, I now find time to do these things I dreamed about but which I also dreamed about in the practical way of being involved to some degree as a younger man. My first love as an extra curricular activity as a working man was the Canadian Red Cross Society. Starting in the Blood Bank as a donor and which I terminated only when I got to be 65, I worked through all the chairs to Presidency. Now I am only a volunteer on call. But it is a valid, live interest.

I was a Kiwanian as a business man. Dropped out in later years but have gone back in retirement and find myself busier than ever as Program Chairman. This effort keeps me in contact with all sorts of people and alert to changes in the pace of life. It is no easy job to develop a new program 52 weeks a year. Yes, we meet every week and there must be a valid program.

In retirement I joined the Ontario Rail Association because I heard they were going to build a steam railroad. That turned out to be partly true, and so my ambition of being a Gandy Dancer could come true. I loved the old steam trains, as dirty as they were in non-airconditioned days. It turned out that there has been a lot of hand labour and I have helped lay track and worked on restoration of old cars. The heavy exercise has been beneficial to me; the only bad part is that now I am a Director of the organization.

I go back to school at least once a year. A local high school uses me, and my wife, as speakers about the old days, and to a degree, I also share my business life with the students. We enjoy these sessions although we are slightly horrified at the easy discipline we find in the classes. There is more work to be done in this area and we would be deeply involved as assistants at the school except that Florida calls in late winter and we would have to leave at some crucial periods. So we desist but the demand is there."

- "My own eyes had been oriented toward retirement since I was twenty-six, so the transition from working for dollars to working for fun came easily, whereas there was often a great grinding of gears in the lives of some friends.

What I had not guessed that I would develop, or even had latent within me was any particular desire to serve beyond the confines of my own family and clan. Had anyone suggested that in retirement I might work with juvenile delinquents, or prison inmates, let alone volunteer for Third World Service, I'd have smiled politely. Underneath my breath I'd say 'nuts to you my friend. Its every man for himself in this world.' New perspective was shifting me to the role of a part time do-gooder. It was an uncomfortable feeling like that of a small boy shifting from a weekday T-shirt to a starched one for Sundays. This was tempered with a sense of shame, of being unaware so long that I was a member of the human race regardless of skin coloring."

The Advantage of Experience

Opportunity to pass on a wealth of experience is also important, and many have been able to do so. However, some feel that more provision should be made so that this resource could be used more fully.

- "Heritage Canada spends large amounts of executive skill and money to preserve old buildings. Wintario makes grants for arenas and other buildings for entertainment.

What about a Heritage Workshop in a community? Renovate the premises, restore old furniture, needlework, tableware and other antiques. Publish favourite recipes, and have a store to sell them. It could bring out so many rusting skills and alleviate fears of not being needed."

Time is on the side of older people. It takes time to gain experience and the longer a person has lived, the greater his or her advantage in this respect. This is especially true of senior citizens who have a knowledge of special skills no longer widely used. This knowledge, as well as being of practical value is also often of historical interest.

- Will be 72 years young next month, and have been retired since 1971. Have led a very active career in my time. Was the youngest wireless operator ever employed by a Canadian company in 1924 at age 17. Was involved in the first batteryless radio sets as developed by Ted Rogers -- in the manufacturing end. Was on a geophysical prospecting team in 1928, when this method was in its developing stage. Was the communications wireless operator when the Flin Flon Mine of Hudson Bay Mining was undergoing feasibility study and the town was being designed in part of 1928 and 1929. I am a member of the Telephone Pioneers of America, and Canadian Motion Picture Pioneers. Was involved in the installation of the first talking motion pictures in Canada from end of 1929 and for the next 35 years, with another large Canadian organization in the communications field. And in this process involved with the developing acoustic and sound conditioning industry, working with architects, etc."

Many seniors are recording their experiences in autobiographical form, or are helping to preserve our heritage through family or local histories:

- "In the past year I finished and had printed a little book, Memories of My Childhood so the old ways would not be forgotten. Of the hundred copies I had printed (I received 105) I gave away at Christmas over fifty copies to family and friends. I put some in bookstores where they readily sold. I am left with only five copies."

Roles in Family and Community

Contributions which aid in the preservation of our heritage are extremely important. These however, should not lead us to mistakenly believe that senior citizens live only in the past. They play vital roles in the family and in the community of the present day.

For some, the job of providing guidance to the young, family members or otherwise, is a priority.

- "There are instances where ill health, bereavement of loved ones, change in circumstances, etc, take over some lives, causing bitterness, intolerance, melancholy, and anxiety. We all must face disappointments, grief, and sometimes fear through life, but if our mental health and attitude be right, we should have the strength and stamina to face up to these inevitable circumstances and overcome them. We, who have seen many years have such a wealth of knowledge and sound advice to offer to those who come to us in confidence, and we should exercise every effort to help and encourage them in every beneficial manner, especially our young people."
- "We have limited contacts with young people. They have called on us for advice about real estate, income tax forms, job hunting, or coaching in mathematics. All of this we enjoy doing. In the past I have been helped, and now it is a very real pleasure to be helping someone else."

Along with advice and guidance, seniors are also able to offer that precious commodity - their time.

- "We have plenty of time to think, to look back on our triumphs and our failures, to brood over many things we should have done differently, and chief among these is taking more time to relax with our families. Poverty makes us all tense. We must go go go, or so we think, else our families will suffer from lack of necessities, when all the while they are suffering from lack of personal attention, more participation in their games, more chatting with them and their pals. Now we are living in a more prosperous world, but I sometimes think children are suffering still more from lack of these things. Parents think money can take the place of these things -- It can't."

Taking Time

There is much to be gained in freedom from the clock. Being able to slow down and appreciate life has additional benefits such as the sense of freedom and peacefulness that can be conveyed to others.

- "As I grow older life has taken on a new meaning. I thank God for each day. One begins to realize the brevity of life, as friends and acquaintances pass on. We begin to value the things we formerly took for granted, or were too busy to notice in our younger years. I appreciate the ability to be able to do my own work around the house and garden, to walk outdoors, to see the beauty of the changing seasons.

Time goes much faster as one grows older. There is not as long a span between Easter and Christmas as in my younger years. In one's younger years the future was so distant, full of plans and dreams, in growing older, planning for today or a day at the time seems sufficient.

There are many advantages in growing older, one is the freedom to be oneself, not to have to strive to impress or compete, except with oneself. In spite of time slipping by us, we still have more time to enjoy again some things we enjoy in childhood, a starry sky on a winter evening, sitting by the lake watching a sunset, suddenly noticing a wild flower we had forgotten. These things take on new meaning."

With some of the pressures of the working world now past, many seniors relax and take the time to enjoy simple things they didn't take notice of before. Some feel a heightened sensitivity and appreciation of nature:

- "Growing old means seeing more depth in the green of the springtime, more variety in the colours of fall, enjoying the beauty of a bare tree against a sunset-tinted sky. It is delighting in the smile of a little child, in the peace and joy reflected in the face of an aged saint with a deep-rooted faith in God. It is savouring the food we eat, taking pleasure in the many comforts of life."

Patriotism

The vast beauty found particularly in Canadian landscapes was a favourite theme by many writers.

- "Travel to me is one of life's greatest pleasures, and can extend our education as far as our country is concerned, much better than any textbook. I have found firsthand, on visiting different sections of our country, that what we were taught about our land and its different peoples, together with reports of the press media, are very often incorrect and misleading. Travelling this marvelous country from coast to coast is a thrilling voyage. No one, however brilliant can do full justice to the awesomeness of the Rocky Mountains, or the wild beauty of the Cabot Trail. There are thousands of lovely places to explore, wonderful people to converse with, from the fishermen of the east coast to the farmers of the prairies. This is by far the best way to get to know your native land. To judge it from your armchair watching television, or simply by reading travel brochures, will never give you the true picture."

Patriotic sentiments expressed seem to reflect as well as a pride in the beauty of their country and all it stands for, a sense of pride in themselves. Seniors see it as a reflection of their past and continuing efforts - something worth being proud of.

- "Try to remember we are all on the Canadian team. The harder we work, the greater the rewards for the team. The Canadian team has achieved a great deal and is respected by most other teams. Look with pride on our record - and maintain it. Those of us who have laboured so hard to make Canada the haven it is today are proud of the part we have played in creating it. If our hands tremble when we sign our pension cheques it is not because we feel unworthy."

Speaking Out

Another kind of freedom is also discovered later in life by many people, being able to speak one's mind openly on many issues. More than one person remarked that when they were younger they didn't feel they could be quite so forthright because they were concerned about the responsibility of holding down a job and raising a family.

Senior citizens speak out about the state of the world today as it affects people in general and as it affects senior citizens in particular.

- "In some areas seniors are organizing to help each other, and this is a necessity. We must speak up for ourselves.
- "Have you noticed that Senior Citizens are becoming a recognized potential force in our Western Society, ask any politician and he will tell you that a few years from now their 'Voice' will be heard loud and clear."

Many now feel that not only do they have the freedom to speak out but that, in fact, they have an obligation to do so, to get involved, and to take action wherever possible. Often this is viewed as the continuation of a lifelong duty:

- "With love and consideration I could make life youthful and vibrant by involving myself in civic, social and religious activities in the community, unlike those who tiptoe through the years like treading on eggs, afraid to face the reality and truth of the consequences. When in doubt I faced the facts squarely and fearlessly, I did it to avoid the evils and threat of laziness. What was thought right to do, I did it; what was thought right to get, I got it and what was thought right to have, I had it to the best of my ability. Thank God, I conquered the evils of idleness, absence of caring, and lack of involvement in life. Normally we are beset with worries, home troubles, insecurity and vicissitudes which happened several times in my life but I didn't wallow alone in my melancholy, instead I made a fresh start with the home and community projects in new perspective with increased interest and magically I have continued to live fully, vigorously and joyfully.

The best portion of my humble life was the time dedicated to little deeds and unremembered acts of kindness and love to others. My responses and intelligent recognition of the truth about other person's needs increased my deep and abiding love and consideration which kept my life always aglow. My ideal of useful life guided me to search for more effective ways to serve others rather than adhere to the most destructive way that mars the progress and the happiness of other persons. Hence my involvement in varied community activities, serving others with love and devotion, thinking of others before myself guided me to reap more contentment and satisfaction and to avoid the pang of old age."

An Ideal Situation

It is hard to imagine a community which wouldn't benefit if all the members, including senior citizens, had the opportunity to contribute as fully as they are able. Some, however, feel that this isn't usually what happens.

- "Unfortunately our wisdom and experience are often ignored or dismissed. We are a valuable asset, largely wasted."

Despite this, many senior citizens still make an effort to play important and diverse roles in society. One lady explained the part she feels seniors ought to play-- her description, in fact, would probably be applicable to people of all ages.

- "As seniors we have special responsibilities. For instance, concern for those ill in hospitals and institutions. There is more to be done in this area. Seniors should be as independent as possible and help others to be the same. We must be responsible for eating properly to keep ourselves well and if we can become involved in the community there are benefits on both sides.

Our young people are growing into a confusing world with so many of the old values and guidelines abandoned. If we can help by listening or talking to them we can perhaps establish a better understanding of life for them and for ourselves.

This is not a time to be idle but to be active and make ourselves seen and heard as a strong force. Know what our governments are doing. Are the politicians listening to us? If not, why not? Find out and be sure you use your vote. It represents your duty as a citizen of a free country and is also a bit of power. Do not ever say, 'I am just one person, my vote won't count'. It does.

Responsible Senior Citizens. This should be our aim. We have the time to use in numerous productive ways for ourselves and for others. In this way we continue to enrich our lives

The young are taking courses in assertiveness. Let us also be assertive when there is need and the occasion to speak up. We are important because we can make ourselves valuable in terms of living. We can lead the way."

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